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THE MEANING OF ANTIQUITY: SEPTEM LIBERALES ARTES¹

ABSTRACT: Dürüşken Çiğdem, *The meaning of Antiquity: Septem Liberales Artes* (Znaczenie antyku. Siedem sztuk wyzwolonych).

The article aims to address the meaning of Antiquity as it appears in the educational system of this most influential civilization.

Keywords: knowledge; mental education; liberal arts; philosophy; Plato's cave; tree of wisdom.

The maxim “γνῶθι σεαυτόν: know thyself”² which the seven sages of ancient Greece engraved on the lintel of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is not just any command, but the seal of the common memory of Antiquity. This memory, above all, orders human beings “to know” both their own nature and the Nature in which they exist. This value given to knowing is also the proof that classical culture transcends time and place.

The architects of this civilization, Greece and Rome, regard human beings, distinguished from all other living creatures by virtue of his reason, as a microcosm inside the cosmos, and aim to equip him with a qualified education that will validate this distinction. This human-centred form of education is a construction of mind and character that continues uninterrupted from birth to death. It prepares the mind to receive the highest forms of knowledge that it can attain and the character to gain the maturity to absorb this knowledge, as it has been summarized in Socrates's doctrine as “virtue is knowledge.”³ The aim is to raise free, learned and virtuous individuals who are right-thinking, right-speaking and right-acting, and to form an ideal society consisting of such individuals. This education that evolved from Homer's noble warrior into Plato's philosopher, then donned a toga to continue as Cicero's *doctus orator*, there caught his breath, and was finally institutionalized in the universities of the Middle Ages, is generally

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Eyüp Çoraklı and Dr. Ekin Öyken of Istanbul University Department of Latin Language and Literature for their assistance in completing this article.

² Paus. *Des. Gr.* 10, 24, 1.

³ Plat. *Men.* 87b.

known as the liberal arts education (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία; liberales artes). The sole reason of it being referred as free (liberalis) was that it suited the freeman. Because the knowledge that would be attained was intended purely to develop the mind, rather than for economic concerns. It was not local but universal, and so it would exist as long as the human mind existed. In this respect, liberal arts were completely differentiated from those arts aimed at no more than subsistence and which were *unworthy of freeman* (βάνανσοι; artes illiberales).

In the discovery and development of this form of education lay the Greek ideal of raising individuals with harmony (ἁρμονία) between the body and spirit, for the Greeks believed that in order to gain a high level of consciousness, one must first have a vigorous body and good morals. Only then could the accord between the beautiful and the good (καλοκάγαθία) be grasped, and only such an individual was considered ready to learn. That is why gymnastics and music in a larger and deeper sense are found at the roots of this form of education. Music, as an art that included poetry, had exceptional value for the Greeks: it did not merely consist of playing instruments or singing, but also of literacy, and it was seen as the mother of all arts and sciences. For Pythagoras, music was a wide web of knowledge encompassing reading and writing, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and the realm of the philosopher (φιλόσοφος), a term of his own invention. For Plato, it had a distinctive value as an inspiration and guide to philosophy, and was the mainstay in intellectual education. Music and poetry are first separated in Aristotle's education system, which he called *free sciences* (ἐλευθερία ἐπιστήμαι). To these two he added drawing and thus established the first step of his own system. He reserved the second step for arithmetic and geometry. Philosophy, which these steps led up to, was the pinnacle of this education. Aristotle divided philosophy into two parts: theory and practice. Under the former, he placed first philosophy (πρώτη φιλοσοφία) and physics (φυσική). First philosophy, or theology, was the discipline that would come to be named as metaphysics and contained knowledge of the *Unchangeable*. Physics on the other hand was knowledge about the *Changeable*. Under the latter, Aristotle first placed the discipline of *ethics*, containing *politics* and *economics*, and then *poetics*, or *aesthetics*.

When we look at the general picture, we see that the subdisciplines emerged from music and poetry, advanced in parallel with the development of philosophical thought and took on a clear structure in the classical age in which philosophy matured. Throughout this period, every thinker brought a pattern of the fabric of this mental education to the forefront to grace the stage of history, but never lost sight of the entirety of the picture. When the mind's gaze was entirely turned to human nature, and education was directly brought onto the agenda of philosophy with the Sophists, the notion that virtue (ἀρετή) can be taught started to gain ground. Thus rhetoric (ῥητορική) became the focal point of this education. Rhetoric, in its widest sense, gives one the proficiency to speak fluently. But most importantly, it teaches one how to consider the matter at hand from both

sides and to defend a case in a correct and convincing manner. This is the practical benefit of the rhetoric. But in theory, it gives the person his true identity. For it is, first of all, an art based on the speaking ability; and this ability is the greatest power that defines human beings and makes them realize their social and cultural nature (ζῆλον πολιτικόν). As a result, a human can only establish his existence in society – that is, live like a civilized person – by internalizing this art. On the other hand, a person who masters this art first understands the essence and logic of language. This leads him from a knowledge of letters to a knowledge of numbers. A person with a grasp of the mathematical sciences is also a master in the truest sense of the fundamental problems of philosophy. However, the practical side of rhetoric may divert one's mind. Rhetoric carried out solely with the aim of making convincing speeches may give a person some general information, but it detracts him from grasping the truth.⁴ Being aware of this danger, Socrates criticized the Sophistic approach, which allowed for the Greek culture to be knit solely from rhetoric, and reminded the Greeks of the phrase “know thyself!” Because Greek people, according to Socrates, should not lose themselves in the shallows of such general information; they should review and question all the information they possess and try to reach the true knowledge. To this end, education must secure the enlightenment of the mind, and must enable one to distinguish at every step what he knows and what he does not know, and even what he may know and what he may not know. Finally, in the face of the divine wisdom or eternal truth, one must reach a point where he is aware that he knows nothing. As the oracle at Delphi announced, what made Socrates the “wisest man of all time” was nothing more than this awareness.

These words of Socrates inviting the Athenians to know themselves would become the inspiration for the *ideal person* in Plato's mind. This ideal person would have such a sharpened mind that he could comprehend the truth; would be a philosopher in the true meaning of the word and hence would possess the abilities to govern a just state. In fact, he, with all these characteristics, is properly human. In his detailed account of the education process that will create this ideal person, Plato, while criticising the general understanding of his time, left us the most fundamental and clearest description of liberal education in Antiquity.

Plato first begins by portraying a person's mental world with allegorical expressions: he imagines an underground cave with people chained there since their childhoods. Behind these people, who are held prisoner in the depths of this cave, there is a fire that is continually burning, whose light falls in front of them; between the fire and the people there is a low wall. Behind the wall, people pass by, sometimes talking, sometimes falling silent, and carrying wooden or stone puppets in a human or animal form. Unaware of the light, the puppets and their shadows, the prisoners mistake the shadows falling in front of them

⁴Dürüşken 2001: 13–23.

for real things. This situation represents the lowest step of awareness, namely assumption (δόξα), and almost everyone on earth is at this level of knowledge. If one of the prisoners gets rid of the chains and gets up, turns his head and sees the light, his eyes will be painfully dazzled and he will at first find it difficult to distinguish the shadows from the objects he sees. And if he is told that what he has seen is an illusion, how shocked he will be; the world may collapse around his head, but he will still turn and run back to the cave and shadows, which he believes are real. Then, if this person is dragged by force out of the cave, this time the light will burn his eyes, and for a moment he will not be able to see anything. But he will get used to this light with time. Firstly, he will begin to easily distinguish the shadows, and then see the reflections of people, animals and other objects in the waters, and finally he will see the things themselves. Then he will lift up his head and see the shapes in the sky, and then the sky itself. At night he will watch the stars and the moon; when it is day, the sunlight, and finally the sun itself, that is, not its reflection in the water, but its very self, just as it is and where it is. And at that moment he will understand that the seasons and the years occur and follow one another due to it, then will realize that it is the cause of everything he sees,⁵ which means that from this point onwards he will discover the truth behind the falsehood and reach the highest form of knowledge, that is, the true knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).

According to Plato, the world in which we live is like this cave dungeon conjured up here, while the fire that lights the cave is the sunlight hitting the earth; and as for the slope that reaches up to the world above and the sun seen there, these mark the ascendance of the soul to the realm of ideas. The sun on the horizon of the visible world is actually the *Idea of the good* on the plane of ideas, which is the realm that can only be imagined and contemplated. The aim of the human life is to grasp this highest knowledge, that of Good and Truth. However, as can be seen, it is not easy to reach this knowledge; to this end, the human mind must be constantly shaped and educated.

So in the scene Plato describes, the person who emerges from the depths of the cave to see the real light, and comes to know the true nature of the objects he has seen only the shadows of, and thus reaches the truth, is representative of an educated person. For he is very different from people who content themselves with what they see, accept it without questioning, and whose eyes are used to the dark. He has managed to transcend the visible world, abandoning false assumptions in favour of the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of knowledge. Such a person would already be the one to run Plato's ideal state, for the person to be placed at the helm of this state must have a philosophical mind and pure understanding, and his mind must be sharpened to the extent that he can grasp the truth. However, as has been emphasized before, in order to reach this level,

⁵Plat. *Polit.* 7.514a-517d.

a person must use his mind to study a series of basic subjects and sharpen his perceptions. These are the knowledge and abilities that are perfected through the Greek παιδεία, and they are above the physical training (γυμναστική) that concerns the needs of the mortal body and seeks to keep it robust for tough conditions, and the musical education (μουσική) that instils harmony and order into the soul and gives rhythm to one's behaviour. For these two arts, through working towards creating a bodily and spiritually able person, aim more at teaching good habits rather than knowledge. That is why, in Plato, the mathematical disciplines that will bring the human mind to maturity are placed above them. Placed at the top, arithmetic (ἀριθμητική) must be learnt first, as it is common to all subjects and all intellectual activities. Arithmetic is the general knowledge and skill to count numbers and carry out book-keeping. This knowledge is necessary for a statesman commanding an army and is a *sine qua non* for those carrying out trade, but the true aim in learning arithmetic is the value that it adds to the mind. This knowledge develops one's ability to think abstractly and to conceptualise the true nature of existence. In other words, to enable the soul to reach the truth, this discipline first urges it to think.

The next discipline to be dealt with is geometry (γεωμετρική). It gives us the important and beneficial knowledge for life: first and foremost, it has an important place in commanding armies, and from this perspective it is a necessary weapon of a statesman's arsenal. Even if it gives a general impression that it is entirely concerned with the shapes of objects and the measurement of area, actually this knowledge allows us to contemplate the world of phenomena, and moreover, the real being, that is, the essence of existence. On the other hand, like arithmetic, this knowledge can also be learnt just for the sake of knowledge, for geometry is the knowledge of whatever is ever-existing and never changes, not of things that come and go, are born and die, or exist and then disappear. Geometry is the knowledge of eternal existences. Thus, our gaze turns from bottom to top, and our mind is lifted to the level where it can comprehend knowledge about eternal truths that do not change with time or place. On the third rung of education lies astronomy (ἀστρονομία). Astronomy first gives information about the seasons, the years and the months, and it is of course as essential for statesmen as for farmers and fishermen. But we must put the practical benefits of this information to one side and focus on its true function. The truth is, by gazing at the stars that embroider the skies and calculating their movements, we do not really turn our eyes upwards to the light of the mind. For the countless stars in the sky belong in fact to the world in which we live. Therefore, there is no difference between lifting our heads to examine the stars and lowering them to examine the earth. In the end, this knowledge has no aim other than to sharpen the reason. On the fourth rung is found harmony (ἁρμονία). Just as the topic of interest in astronomy is movement seen with the eye, in harmony it is that heard with the ear, that is, movements of sound. Thus, harmony and astronomy can

be counted as sister-disciplines, and therefore, the aim of harmony, which looks like the knowledge of the notes and modes is not plain information but occupies the mind with higher things.

The philosopher will understand the unseen link between all these disciplines and, as a result, will be able to absorb the truth by purifying the mind from some uncertain and baseless thoughts. But the education of the ideal statesman and the ideal philosopher, in short, of the ideal person that Plato yearns for, is not limited to mathematical disciplines such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony, all for one purpose, that is, the training of the mind. A person must also have a knowledge of the method by which he can reach the highest stage of philosophy. This method is none other than dialectics (διαλεκτική) which organizes knowledge and thoughts, allows people to express themselves, and teaches the skills of debating and defending judgements. Thus, it also contains logic, grammar and rhetoric. But dialectics is very different from other disciplines that have been so far considered, because it is an activity in mind itself. It takes no notice of any sensory data, and does not involve the least trace of emotion. Indeed, a mind that is able to comprehend the truth should never fall into the plane of shadows. Dialectics aims to reach the essence of being, in other words, the knowledge of the eternal truth by the sole act of the intellect, and it gets the mind to the limits of the world of thought.⁶

All these disciplines, which intellectually equip a person, all these liberal arts, step by step pull him out of his cave; first his chains are broken, then his eyes are blinded by the light of day, and then he is brought face to face with the divine visions of real objects and their reflections in the waters. They are no longer the shadows cast by a dim light as before. As soon as his eyes have gotten used to this world, he begins to achieve a level where he can comprehend the truth itself. Hence such an education does not simply liberate a person from his dark cave, but also enables the highest reaches of the soul to contemplate the most flawless part of existence.⁷ To put it more clearly, a person reaches his own consciousness – that is, he becomes human in the fullest sense.

The fundamental curriculum of this human-centred conception of education, which matured in the classical Greece, was placed in a certain framework by the Hellenistic literature schools, and started being commonly categorized as linguistic and mathematical disciplines in seven steps. As a result, an educational curriculum, which revealed the anatomy of the human mind, emerged, and hence provided an account of human life.

The part of Rome, which embraced the educational ideas of Greece and adapted them to its own culture, in the formation of this curriculum should not be underestimated, since Rome carried out a very clever policy from the moment

⁶Plat. *Polit.* 7.522a-532b.

⁷Plat. *Polit.* 7.532c.

it began to interact with the Greek world, and in order to explore Greece from within, focused first on its language and its conception of education. In this way, the Romans became familiar with the essence of the Greek ideals. First of all, they embraced the liberal arts, which had been solidly fashioned in the Greek mindset, and set to work adapting it to their own political and social ideals, and strongly pragmatic worldview, largely based on moral philosophy. At first they did not pay attention to the distinction between *arts worthy of freeman* and *arts unworthy of freeman*. In the early years, conservative Romans such as Censor Cato held that protecting one's own language and particular educational values was key to an abiding society, and they opposed the Greek style of education and did not wish to blend it with their own culture. Indeed Cato, in line with this aim, took upon himself the education of his son, and wrote books on ethics, rhetoric, medicine, military science, farming, and law. But this conservative attitude did not find general acceptance in society, and Greece's liberal arts spread with a startling pace among the Romans and began slowly to train and mature the intellects of the Roman youth.

From the republican era to the empire, various authors penned a series of works of different types on this matter, both from a practical and from a theoretical perspective. From a general point of view, these works from Varro to Quintilian, suggest that grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics played a dominant role in Roman education, and that philosophy, particularly moral philosophy, was given at least as much importance as these, and that arithmetic, geometry, music, and indeed the disciplines of architecture, medicine, and astronomy also became increasingly popular. Some scholars even thought that the seven liberal arts had almost been formed when Varro wrote his *Disciplinarum Libri*, a lost nine-book treatise, but this does not go beyond a claim.⁸ Seneca, the most important representative of the Roman Stoa, begins a letter, where he sets out his ideas about liberal arts (*liberalia studia*), by clarifying that he does not value any discipline aimed at making money. He believes that such disciplines somehow shape the intellect but do not contribute to the digestion of what is learnt or to turning it into the perpetual knowledge. This contribution can only be made by liberal arts, and especially by philosophy (*sapientia*).⁹ The famous teacher of rhetoric Quintilian focuses on grammar and rhetoric, but touches upon music, geometry, and astronomy as well. At this point, the acquisition of all this knowledge may appear to be far above the human capacity, and such education far distant from being realistic, but Vitruvius gives the best response to this worry. For him, liberal arts (*encycliōs disciplina*) are like a single body formed of different organs. The subject of each is tightly bound to the others, and they are in constant exchange of knowledge. For this reason, a person who has been educated in

⁸ Davidson 1902: 242.

⁹ Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 88.

different branches of the arts since his early youth immediately sees that these subjects are each grounded on the same fundamental building blocks and that they complete one another reciprocally, and finds no difficulty in learning them all at once.¹⁰

Putting all this aside, the true representative of the Greek culture and mentality in Rome was Cicero. The *humanitas* education he developed and laid out the framework for with the aim of raising an ideal *orator*-statesman similar to Plato's philosopher-king, fitted perfectly in with the content of liberal arts which was intended to create intellectually free individuals. It is obvious why Cicero placed the term *humanitas*, which derived from the word *humanus*, at the foundation of this educational approach, for he wished more than anything that the *upright man* should prevail: a person who has all the characteristics of human nature and character, who is distant from wildness and savagery, and also intelligent, civilized, cultured, noble and sensitive; in other words, the one who represents the full meanings of the words *humanus* and *humanitas*. If we consider this from the Roman perspective, such a man must definitely be a statesman and use this goodness of character for the goodness of the state. This goodness can be best expressed when the right thought is put in the right words. Thus, this statesman must at the same time be an *orator*. Hence, rhetoric and moral philosophy represent the most important foundation of the education in Cicero's mind. Elegance in speech and grace in behaviour is only possible with an education that blends these two. In addition, logic, history, and law were also the basis for the formation of this ideal statesman, or in Cicero's own phrase, the *doctus orator*. In fact, the tie between these different disciplines is made clear and concrete in Cicero's education system. This is a situation originating from the unique structure of rhetoric, because this art extends throughout all disciplines. A rhetor must be able to speak on any subject, and thus must be familiar not only with the topics listed above, but at the same time for instance with psychology, military science, naval science, medicine, geography, and astronomy.¹¹ These forms of knowledge are all founding elements that support and polish rhetoric, and increase its creativity and effectiveness. For that reason, rhetoric must be considered a discipline that both belongs to *politior humanitas* and *puerilis institutio*.¹²

Cicero, who writes "we are all called human, but only those of us who have become civilized by means of the humanities are human,"¹³ pointed out the meaning of the liberal arts more clearly than the Greeks did. Nevertheless, the categorization of these subjects as seven disciplines organized under two

¹⁰ Vit. Arch. 1.1.12.

¹¹ Cic. Ora. 45–73.

¹² Gwynn 1926: 82, 101; Dürüşken 2014: 327–334.

¹³ Cic. Rep. 1.28.

headings, namely *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and their coinage as seven liberal arts (septem liberales artes) would not appear until the fifth or sixth centuries AD. This formation can be followed in the works of St. Augustine, Martianus Capella, Boethius, Cassiodorus and Isidorus. Among them, Martianus's fifth-century work entitled *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*The Wedding of Mercury and Philology*), despite all its peculiar features such as a fantastical style, personified concepts and symbolic portrayals, remained influential during the Middle Ages up until the 12th century.¹⁴ The most important detail of this work is the gradual replacement of the philosophical knowledge expected from the liberal arts student of Antiquity with theological knowledge, for in this work *Mercury*, the messenger god of Greco-Roman mythology, and the mortal *Philology* are married; that is, *Wisdom* and *Elegance*, or *Divine Intellect* and *Word*. Thus immortal nature and mortal nature take steps towards combining. We could put it like this: mortal nature prepares to return to its true nature, to its real home. In this ceremony, the divine husband presents his mortal wife with the liberal arts (disciplinae cycliae) personified as seven maids. Thus grammar, dialectics, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music one by one appear on the medieval stage. The symbolism here says precisely this: mortal nature needs the knowledge of these seven maids in order to continue on the road to immortality, cleanse the intellect of earthly dirt and dust, and perceive the depths of the universe through unclouded eyes.

Then, we come across a diagram known as *Arbor Sapientiae* (The Tree of Wisdom), dating from the end of the 13th century.¹⁵ This is a tree that rises up in the form of two branches from a broad vase at the bottom. The vase from which the tree stems, branches off and forms leaves is the main source, the root, and this source is represented by the word *Sapientia* (Wisdom) engraved on the mouth of the vase. The left side of the tree has the heading *Natura* (Nature) and branches showing the seven ages of man (infant, boy, adolescent, youth, man, old man, and elderly man) rise up from it one by one. The right hand side of the tree carries the heading *Philosophia* (Philosophy), and to complement the seven ages of man come the seven arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, geometry, arithmetic, and astrology). In the gap at the top of the tree, there is drawn up the *Sancta Trinitas* (Holy Trinity) of Christian thought. This inscription is a reminder that a person will one day die and return to his Creator and emphasizes he must be aware of this truth throughout his life, and that he must equip himself for this awareness with appropriate knowledge from the spirit of every age.

This tree is human life itself. It is the immutable order of human nature and life circle. A person at cross-roads on this journey must learn whatever he can

¹⁴Hicks 2012: 307, 314.

¹⁵*Speculum Theologiae* (Beinecke MS 416); see Sears 1986: 140–141.

in order to properly reach an upper turning point. So, first of all, the *trivium*, which teaches the knowledge of speaking and literacy, and then the *quadrivium*, which teaches the mathematical disciplines and therefore higher knowledge, will bring a person from merely living life to knowing the meaning of the life. After all, it makes sense that these subjects are divided into the *trivium* (a place where three roads meet) and the *quadrivium* (a place where four roads meet), for at the difficult turning points on the journey of life, this knowledge will take the person by the hand and guide him to the right path, right until he reaches the highest level of knowledge. Therefore, both philosophy, the summit of the human-focused education of Antiquity, and theology, the summit of the God-focused education of the Middle Ages, would be reached via these arts. For although the centuries, ages, societies, tastes, and expectations might change, as human nature did not, the knowledge contained in these arts appropriate to this nature will never change. The recognition of this universality and unity of the knowledge is the great mark that Antiquity left on the palimpsest of universe.

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THE MEANING OF ANTIQUITY: SEPTEM LIBERALES ARTES

Summary

Liberal arts is a form of mental education originated in Antiquity. This system of education evolved from Homer's noble warrior to Plato's philosopher, then donned a toga to continue as Cicero's *doctus orator*, there caught his breath, and was finally institutionalized in the universities of the Middle Ages. For although the centuries, ages, societies, tastes, and expectations may change, knowledge acquired through this model is as unchanging as human nature. The recognition of this very universality is the greatest heritage of Antiquity. Our article aims to address the meaning of Antiquity as it appears in the educational system of this most influential civilization.